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San Diego Men Arrested For Smuggling, Counterfeit Money

Arrests Among 59 In U.S., Canada

SAN DIEGO -- A probe of alleged conspiracies to launder money and smuggle drugs, weapons and counterfeit goods into the United States led to the arrests of four people in the San Diego area, officials said Monday.

The weekend arrests were among 59 in the United States and Canada involving the FBI, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement and other agencies, federal officials said.

Following the arrests, federal indictments were unsealed in Los Angeles and Newark, N.J., naming 87 people allegedly involved in the smuggling and counterfeiting operation.

The charges include violations of Racketeering Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) statutes, dealing in counterfeit U.S. currency, narcotics and illegal weapons trafficking, money laundering and conspiracy to defraud the United States.

"The criminal conspiracies we have ended here had the potential to undermine our financial security and compromise the safety of our streets," said U.S. Attorney General Alberto R. Gonzales.

"We are grateful to the men and women whose actions and bravery prevented these drugs, weapons and counterfeit money from getting into the hands of criminals who could use them to harm America," he said. "Our nation is safer thanks to the law enforcement officers, especially the undercover agents, who exposed this dangerous criminal enterprise."

More than half of the arrests stemmed from an investigation dubbed "Operation Smoking Dragon," which resulted in the seizure of nearly \$1.2 million in counterfeit currency, authorities said.

"Operation Smoking Dragon" uncovered an extremely sophisticated smuggling operation that included the production of counterfeit goods and their distribution across the country," said U.S. Attorney Debra Wong Yang.

"The top-to-bottom nature of the organization has resulted in a racketeering indictment that has crippled an enterprise responsible for flooding the United States with bogus consumer products, dangerous drugs and fake government-issued documents," she said.

Authorities determined that cartons of counterfeit cigarettes -- worth \$40 million -- were smuggled into the United States, along with 9,100 ecstasy pills, four kilograms of methamphetamine and several hundred thousand dollars worth of counterfeit goods, including Viagra and other pharmaceuticals.

Those arrested in San Diego County in connection with the probe were identified as:

- Frank Marogi Najor, 61, of La Mesa
- Hamza Beydoun, 44, of San Diego
- Basam Salem, 29, of Spring Valley
- Bashar Kareem Salem, aka, Sean Salem, 25, of Spring Valley